

## **From Women and Resistance in South Africa, 1982**

By Cheryl Walker, Onyx Press, 1982; Chapter 14 (part, from p. 167)

# ***Problems within the NEC***

***(of the Federation of South African Women – FSAW)***

Considerable difficulties were experienced in this early period in establishing an effective national executive committee [NEC]. The forced removal of (Ray) Alexander from the key position of national secretary, so soon after the (1954) inaugural conference, was a great loss to the new organisation. Her role in establishing it had, as we have seen, been a central one, and her organisational experience, energy and wide-ranging political contacts were sorely needed.

She was not the sort of woman to accept her enforced retirement from politics obediently and she continued to play an important behind-the-scenes role. But her links with the NEC and other Congress leaders had to be clandestine from then on, and this inevitably hampered her effectiveness. All her correspondence with other political leaders had to be anonymous. Often she resorted to a clumsy kind of code to disguise both her identity and the subject matter of her correspondence. Any meetings she had with the remaining members of the NEC in Cape Town had to be secret and kept small. It was a cumbersome way of operating and it soon became clear that her banning had left a vacuum which would be difficult to fill.

Part of the reason for this lay in the extremely precarious position of African women – the backbone of the FSAW – in Cape Town after 1955. This was because the Western Cape had been selected by the ideologues of apartheid as the easiest and therefore the first area where the African presence in the urban areas of the country could be visibly reduced and the grand theory of apartheid – geographical separation of white and black – vindicated.

The African population in Cape Town was always a relatively small one, numbering just under 50,000 in 1951, out of a total population of 577,648. 'Coloureds', numbering 272,314 people in that census year, formed the largest single 'race' group.

In 1955 the government announced that it intended eventually to remove the entire African population out of the Western Cape since this was the 'natural home' of the 'Coloured' people. As a start, the Western Cape was declared a 'Coloured preferential area'. This meant that employers had to give preference to 'Coloured' workers over African in their businesses and industries. Muriel Horrell's handbook, *Legislation and Race Relations*, describes the general terms of this declaration thus:

"The government planned, as a first stage, to remove foreign Africans, to 'freeze' the existing position as regards families, to send back to the reserves all women and children who did not qualify to remain, and to allow only the controlled entry of migratory workers."

As a result, influx control measures were vigorously enforced and pass raids and arrests in the Cape Town area stepped up.

The announcement of this policy plunged African residents of the area into a nightmarish situation where nobody could feel completely secure in their houses or their jobs, not even those who previously had qualified for permanent residence. Living and working in Cape Town – even if one been born there – was henceforth to be regarded as a concession and not a right, a concession dependent on some bureaucrat in an office with a rubber stamp. The whole community suffered because of the closing off of job and housing opportunities, the enforced removal of the 'unqualified' to remote rural areas in the Transkei and Ciskei. Women were particularly hard-hit because of their peripheral position in the labour market and the fact that very few met the requirement for permission to stay in town.

The authorities made use of this opportunity not only to remove economically redundant or superfluous women, but also to harrass individuals who were politically active. *New Age* carried several reports on their efforts to deport ANCWL activists from Cape Town on the grounds that they did not qualify to be there. Thus, in late 1955, Annie Silinga, ANCWL and FSAW activist, was convicted of illegal residence in Cape Town, although she claimed she had been resident there since 1937. She was deported to the Transkei under police escort in February 1956, but returned to fight, ultimately successfully, all subsequent attempts to evict her. Annie Silinga was a woman of enormous courage and irrepressible conviction; but hers was an individual fight against bureaucracy and intimidation. Inspiring though it was, she could not challenge the structures of coercion single-handed.

After 1955 African women in the Western Cape were a vulnerable, threatened group. Many of them were "unqualified" and lived illegally in townships and squatter communities. They risked their entire future in the area if they became politically active. In this way the 1955 ruling inhibited the emergence of a strong

and sizeable core of African women leaders in the Cape Town area and undermined the effectiveness of both the ANCWL and the FSAW.

As a temporary measure, until the next conference could elect a new executive, Dora Tamana of the ANCWL in Cape Town took over the position of acting secretary from Ray Alexander. Cecilia Rosier, a member of COD, took over as acting treasurer from Hetty McLeod, who had been banned at the same time as Alexander. Neither temporary appointments proved satisfactory; Rosier's work was hampered by ill-health, while for several months of 1955 Dora Tamana was overseas with Lilian Ngoyi on a tour sponsored by the WIDF. For both women, this tour – first to an international congress of women in Lausanne, Switzerland, and then to East Germany, China, the USSR and England – was an unforgettable experience. It meant, however, that the FSAW was without a full-time secretary at an important time once again.

Then, in March 1955, the NEC was further damaged when Ida Mtwana resigned her position as national president. The reasons for this are obscure. Personality clashes seem to have played a part, and, according to one informant, some members of the ANC felt that Mtwana should not be national president of the ANCWL and the FSAW at the same time – that in some way there was a clash between these roles. However, after 1956 Ngoyi was able to combine both positions quite happily, so this explanation is not an entirely adequate one. In place of Mtwana, Gladys Smith, vice-president of the FSAW for the Cape region, took over as acting president. She had neither the dynamism nor the following to prove an effective head. Not long after this, in October 1955, Dora Tamana, acting secretary, was herself banned, and for the next ten months the double responsibility of president and secretary fell on Smith.

An inexperienced and insecure BEC exacerbated the problems of maintaining communications between the centre and the distant regional committees. From the very beginning, in 1954/5, the NEC was complaining of inadequate or non-existent communications with Natal, the Eastern Cape and Kimberley: 'It is sickening how these people never acknowledge letters or report on anything', grumbled a Cape Town correspondent in mid-1955. Poor communications and instability within the NEC hindered the establishment of strong, centralised identity and control within the FSAW. In a report made to the WIDF in early 1956, the Transvaal region of the FSAW commented that it had become 'to some extent and autonomous body, acting frequently on its own initiative in response to prevailing national and regional situations and pressures', although it did maintain links 'as close as possible under the circumstances' with the head office in Cape Town.

The weakness of the NEC proved damaging to the organisation. A few weeks after Alexander's banning, she described the general position as 'serious'. In May 1955, she expressed her private misgivings about the NEC in an unaddressed letter to a Transvaal member of the FSAW: 'Am very unhappy about the NEC... they do not show enough responsibility. At that stage she was already urging the transfer of the head office to Johannesburg as a remedy. By mid-1955 it had become clear to others that Cape Town was not a suitable venue for the head office, and the idea to shift it to Johannesburg, the Congress heartland and political storm-centre of the country, began to gain support.

Organisational shortcomings were not confined to the NEC. Lack of funds meant that nowhere could the FSAW employ a full-time organiser. During 1955 there was discussion on employing Lilian Ngoyi to do this job, but lack of funds meant that the idea had to be shelved. All regions depended heavily on the work of a few dedicated volunteers to keep their day-to-day affairs in order. Many women did not have the necessary education or experience to keep an organisation running smoothly, and this increased the load on the women that did.

Some of the difficulties that the FSAW experienced related directly to the fact that it was an organisation of women. Members' family and household responsibilities frequently interfered with their political commitments. Some husbands resented their wives spending time at meetings and made it difficult or impossible for them to attend. Few black women could afford babysitters, and FSAW women who had small or sick children to care for found it awkward to get away from home. In April 1955, for instance, Josie Palmer missed two Transvaal committee meetings, the first because her daughter was ill, the second because her babysitter arrived too late for her to catch the train. Women also faced problems with transport; private cars were a luxury in the black townships, while public transport was inadequate and often dangerous, particularly for women travelling alone at night. Helen Joseph was one of the few women in the FSAW to have a car of her own – an asset that added greatly to her efficiency, and one she donated gladly to Congress business.

This over-dependence on a few key women hampered the work of the organisation. The Transvaal region, for instance, struggled to cope in early 1955 when its secretary, Helen Joseph, was out of the country on an overseas tour for a few months. In February, a council official wrote to the FSAW to enquire why the appointment had not been kept – but not till the 18<sup>th</sup> April, over two months later, did the FSAW post off its reply, making apologies and requesting a further appointment. Its excuse for its failure to communicate with the council promptly was that its secretary had been overseas and postal arrangements in her absence had been 'unsatisfactory'.

## ***The Membership Issue***

A further major stumbling block in this early period arose over the question of membership. There were two alternatives. Either the FSAW could seek its own mass membership or it could base itself on a federal form, acquiring its members indirectly through each of its affiliated member organisations. The matter was not settled at the inaugural conference. A draft constitution proposing the first alternative – a mass, individual membership – was circulated but failed to win overall approval. Ray Alexander, and later the NEC based in Cape Town, supported this constitution, but Ida Mtwana and, it would seem, the ANCWL in the Transvaal, wanted a federal structure. The debate over this issue was a protracted one that was not easily resolved. Both sides fought stubbornly for their viewpoint to prevail.

In September 1954 Alexander wrote to Mtwana to set out the reasons why she felt an individual membership was preferable. Her biggest concern was that if the FSAW were to be based on affiliated groups only, it would exclude many women who were not members of existing organisations or for whom no such organisations existed. Here Alexander referred specifically to Indian women in Natal, many of whom were not members of the Indian Congress, and to 'Coloured' women who were without a separate organisation of their own. A further consideration – and one which her own banning had already highlighted – was that individuals banned from affiliated organisations would thereby be banned from the FSAW as well. (A point which she did not raise but which became pertinent later on, was that if an affiliated organisation were to be banned, the FSAW would be deprived of a large number of members at one blow.)

In opposing Alexander, Mtwana spoke on behalf of the Transvaal ANCWL, acting, apparently, on the instructions of the provincial ANC. Their main fear was that, if the FSAW were constituted on the basis of an individual membership, it would compete against the ANCWL to the detriment of the latter. In taking this position, the ANC revealed a degree of ambivalence towards the FSAW that it would never entirely overcome. While supporting and welcoming the entry of women into the national liberation movement, it was anxious to retain control over their activities – a control it could exercise effectively over the Women's League but not so successfully over an independent FSAW.

At the heart of the debate between these two alternatives there thus lay a matter of central importance – the relationship between the FSAW and ANC; the relationship between the women's movement and the senior partner in the national liberation movement.

The ANC was adamant on the issue and finally, reluctantly, the individual membership group yielded towards the end of 1954. They conceded not because they had been convinced by the other group's arguments but because they realised that without the support of the ANC, the women's movement would be isolated from the Congress Alliance. This would be detrimental to the women's movement and also, in the long run, to the general liberation struggle itself.

Writing to the Transvaal region of the Federation in November 1954, Dora Tamana, by then acting secretary in the place of the banned Alexander, stated:

"We believe that this opposition to individual membership is due to a fear that if our organisation becomes a mass organisation, it will draw women away from the ANC and perhaps lead to divided loyalties. We do not think there is any justification for this fear, but we might not be able to dispel it easily or quickly. It is only through our work that we shall be able to prove that we have no wish to compete with other organisations... We have therefore decided to make this special concession and exception for the Transvaal."

In a report to the WIDF in early 1956, the FSAW made clear why it was prepared to accept ANC seniority and work within the structures it laid down: 'The African women as the overwhelmingly largest racial group must always form the main basis of a multi-racial women's organisation.' Furthermore, 'Any women's organisation that stands outside this (the national liberation) struggle must stand apart from the mass of women.'

In this issue the superior weight of the ANC within the Congress Alliance prevailed. By insisting on a federal structure for the women's movement, the ANC effectively stamped that movement with the multi-racial structure of the Congress Alliance. The FSAW was never, strictly speaking, a non-racial organisation, although in practice, colour consciousness played very little part in its affairs. This was because it was made up of the ethnically based bodies of the Congress Alliance – the African National Congress, Indian Congress, the white Congress of Democrats and so on. Each of these retained their identity upon affiliation to the FSAW. In a truly non-racial organisation, colour, 'race', ethnicity would have played no part in determining membership. After 1955 the Africanists within the ANC denounced the multiracialism of the Congress Alliance as another form of apartheid, since colour was still a dominant criterion. On the available material, it does not appear that an ideological debate between multi- or non-racialism was at issue in the FSAW in 1954/55. The major concern of the supporters of an individual membership was simply to ensure that the FSAW did not lose out on potential members.

On several occasions in subsequent years, the FSAW pointed to its federal structure to allay fears within the ANC that it wishes to rival the ANCWL, fears which never subsided completely. Thus Marcelle Goldberg, Transvaal President of the FSAW in 1959, wrote: 'I would like to remind you that the Federation... is not an organisation set up in opposition to those already existing organisations... whilst the ANC Women' League struggles specifically for the rights of African women, the Federation by its very nature and composition... strives to bring all women together.' On these occasions it appeared to argue that the affiliation-only measure had been adopted by design specifically to prevent competition with other organisations. This line overlooked the very vigorous opposition to a federal structure that existed within the organisation in 1954/5. Even once the principle had been conceded in November 1954, the Cape Town region continued to query it. The matter was not finally resolved until the second national conference in August 1956. There a constitution was adopted which made it clear that the FSAW was a 'federation... open to organisations or groups of females above the age of 18 years'.

Even once the membership question had been settled, the actual affiliation of organisations to the FSAW proceeded very slowly. Like the ANC itself, the FSAW experienced difficulty in turning general sentiments of support into formal membership. COD was the first of the Congresses to affiliate formally, in June 1955, more than a year after the inaugural conference. Towards the end of 1955 the FSAW sent out a reminder notice to the other Congresses. Despite this, by June 1956 none of them had joined up officially and the FSAW was obliged to send out yet another circular, urging them to attend to the matter. Later that year the Food and Canning Workers Union complied, but it was not until April 1957 that the FSAW could report that all the Congress groups had finally paid their affiliation fees of £1. 1s.

It does not seem that there was outright opposition to affiliating to the FSAW within the Congress Alliance, although certain factions, mainly within the Transvaal ANC, were critical of the organisation and the role it was coming to play. More important in explaining the delay was the fact that member organisations were either too poorly organised to deal with the administrative detail of their formal affiliation promptly, or else, as suggested earlier, did not see the new women's organisations as a particular priority.

However, even though the members of the Congress Alliance were slack about affiliation, this did not prevent the FSAW from acting on the assumption of Congress membership from the earliest. It was always included in Congress activities and its own demonstrations were seen as part and parcel of the national liberation movement struggle by the Alliance.

Interestingly, however, the FSAW was not granted official representation on the national consultative committee [NCC] of the Alliance. This committee was the highest policy-making body within the Alliance. The reason given for the exclusion of the FSAW was that it already had representation through each of its member organisations; to give it a separate representative of its own would be duplication.

This reason overlooked the fact that the FSAW had been formed specifically to represent the interests of women because it was felt that these were not being adequately met in the already existing structures. The exclusion of the FSAW from the NCC pointed to a certain unease about the organisation, a prejudice against women becoming too prominent rather than a deliberate policy of excluding them. However, Helen Joseph was already a member of the NCC, representing COD, and thus could act as spokeswoman for the FSAW; and, in practice, the FSAW liaised closely with the NCC on many campaigns.

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**Course: No Woman, No Revolution**

**14061, Walker, Women and Resistance in South Africa, 1982, C14, part**

3276 words